

Letter to Ambassadors of the United Nations Security Council

May 5, 2017

Dear Ambassador,

Re: Urgent Action Needed to Protect Yemeni Human Rights Advocates and Civil Society

The undersigned human rights and civil liberties organizations write to raise serious concerns about recent efforts by the Government of Yemen to silence renowned Yemeni human rights advocates and civil society leaders. These efforts undermine much-needed human rights work in Yemen; threaten connections between Yemeni civil society and the international community; put the safety and lives of Yemeni advocates at risk; and undercut government commitments, expressed in the *United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*, to respect the work of human rights advocates. The organizations also write to express serious concern regarding continued arbitrary arrests, detentions, and harassment of advocates and activists by the Houthi-Saleh forces in northern Yemen.

It is essential that all parties to the conflict in Yemen fulfill their obligations to respect the independence and rights of human rights defenders and civil society members. International law protects the rights to freedom of association and expression, and Yemen is a state party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

We write to request that you raise the concerns outlined in this letter with the Government of Yemen and the Houthi-Saleh forces. We ask that you take action to support Yemeni advocates—and their work to advance the human rights of all Yemenis—by urging the Government of Yemen to uphold its international commitments and protect Yemeni citizens and civil society.

Civil society work in Yemen is particularly vital at a time when so many Yemenis are suffering from the consequences of the conflict and lack access to urgently needed humanitarian assistance. According to the UN, the country is on the brink of famine. States have an interest in ensuring the freedom and rights of Yemeni civil society are protected. Attacks on Yemeni civil society take place in the context of an armed conflict in which, according to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, at least 4,726 civilians had been killed and 8,217 had been injured, and all sides have committed serious human rights and humanitarian law violations. The work of human rights organizations and the need for documentation on the ground is, therefore, all the more urgent, and will be key to holding all parties to the conflict accountable, and ensuring perpetrators are brought to justice in the future. An active civil society is fundamental if accountability is to replace impunity and such crimes are prevented from becoming further widespread and entrenched. Yemeni civil society produces valuable and independent knowledge about the current situation in Yemen, and work daily to improve conditions for Yemeni civilians.

To be a human rights advocate in Yemen has entailed significant personal risk for many years. Recently, the Government of Yemen, through its embassy in Washington, D.C., wrote a letter to U.S. lawmakers lashing out at prominent Yemeni human rights advocates. As reported in *Foreign Policy*, “Yemen Lashes Out At D.C. Briefing By Human Rights Activists” (March 30, 2017), Yemen accused the human rights defenders of “a political ‘agenda’ tied to Iran-backed Houthi rebels” and of “covertly supporting the Houthis.”

These accusations are baseless. One of the advocates criticized in the letter is Mrs. Radhya Almutawakel, the Chairperson of the Mwatana Organization for Human Rights, a pre-eminent Yemeni civil society organization, globally recognized for its independent and comprehensive human rights investigations. Mwatana has provided invaluable reporting, without bias or political agenda, about all parties to the conflict, on extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, women's rights, enforced disappearances, and many other human rights issues in Yemen. Without Mwatana's work, information about the effects and dynamics of many of these issues would be unknown to the international community, making it substantially harder for the international community to understand and respond to one of the most under-reported armed conflicts in the world today.

Mrs. Almutawakel is internationally-recognized for her work and her expertise on the human rights situation in Yemen. She has previously worked with the Open Society Foundations to document civilian casualties in Yemen, and has also assisted Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. She has been invited to present her work at numerous international events and forums, including at a hearing of the European Parliament. This month, Mrs. Almutawakel was awarded the "Global Advocate Award" from the Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute and invited to be a "Practitioner-In-Residence" at Columbia Law School.

Mrs. Almutawakel has devoted her life to improving the human rights of all Yemenis. She and her organization have documented violations and abuses by all sides to the current conflict in Yemen, including extensive coverage of human rights violations by the Houthis. For example, in November 2016, she [released a report](#) accusing the Houthis of violating international humanitarian law, finding that the Houthis were "responsible for the majority of indiscriminate and bloody attacks launched on residential areas" in the city of Taiz. In June 2016, she [publicly called](#) on the Houthis to release journalists from Houthi prisons, and in May 2016, [she released](#) a major report *They Are Not Here* showing that the Houthis were responsible for widespread enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests. This month, Mwatana released a report documenting civilian casualties caused by antipersonnel and antivehicle mines the Houthis had laid during the current conflict. She and her organization have also done path-breaking work to document civilian casualties caused by other actors, including the [Saudi-led coalition](#), and the [United States](#).

Because of this work, Mrs. Almutawakel and her colleagues at Mwatana have been beaten, harassed, and detained numerous times by the Houthis—the group the Yemeni Government now claims Mwatana are "covertly supporting." This pattern in which the Houthis and allied forces have [curtailed freedoms of association, expression, and liberty](#) has been well documented over the past two years by human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Since late 2014, the Houthis and allied forces have arbitrarily arrested and detained critics and opponents as well as journalists, human rights defenders, and members of the Baha'i community, subjecting scores to enforced disappearance. Since 2015, the Houthi forces also curtailed freedom of association, raiding the offices of and closing down NGOs in Sana'a and threatening their directors and staff.

Although the Yemeni Government's accusations are without any foundation and are contradicted by the record, by publicly linking independent human rights advocates with armed groups and one side to the conflict, they undermine the work of Yemeni human rights organizations and put the freedom and lives of advocates at risk. Since the Yemeni Government's false accusations, media and groups in Yemen have launched a significant public attack against Mrs Almutawakel, exposing her and her colleagues to personal, physical risk and making it more difficult for them to safely conduct their work.

These actions of the Government of Yemen are unacceptable and stand in stark contrast to government commitments outlined in *The Declaration on Human Rights Defenders*, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution A/RES/53/144, which protects the rights of human rights advocates to

promote human rights at the national and international levels. The Yemeni government has a responsibility and a duty to protect the rights of activists, defenders, and NGO workers and create a space in which they can carry out their legitimate work without interference. The government, as well as the Houthi-Saleh forces, should cease any actions, including intimidation and harassment, which would result in preventing Yemeni human rights defenders, activists, and NGOs from exercising their rights to expression and association.

We stand with our Yemeni human rights advocate colleagues. We respectfully request your governments to support their efforts to advance human rights in Yemen, and we ask you to urge the Government of Yemen to uphold international law and for all parties to the conflict to respect the rights of human rights defenders and civil society actors.

Sincerely,

Amnesty International

Article 19

Article 36

Center for Constitutional Rights

Center for Human Rights and Global Justice (New York University School of Law)

Columbia Law School Human Rights Clinic*

Global Justice Clinic (New York University School of Law)*

Human Rights First

Human Rights Watch

International Commission of Jurists

Life for Relief and Development

International Service for Human Rights

Open Society Foundations

PAX

Rights Watch (UK)

Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights

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